

Family Engagement, Diverse Families, and

An Integrated Review of the Literature

Linda Halgunseth



Photo © Ellen B. Senisi

THE TWO MOST INFLUENTIAL ENVIRONMENTS in which young children develop are their homes and their early childhood education programs. In 2005, 60 percent of all U.S. children under age 6 spent some time in the care of persons other than their par-

ents, including 62 percent of White children, 69 percent of Black children, and 49 percent of Hispanic children (Iruka & Carver 2006). Considering that children's time is often divided between these two settings, there is a clear relationship between strong program-family partnerships and children's academic success (Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez 2006; Henrich & Gadaire 2008).

While educators have long known about the importance of family engagement for children's learning, some may feel frustrated by perceived low levels of engagement with some families they serve. Perceptions of low engagement may be due to differences in cultural values or languages spoken between program staff and families. They may also result from a program's approach to family engagement.

This article is based on the 2009 report *Family Engagement, Diverse Families, and Early Childhood Education Programs: An Integrated Review of the Literature*, produced jointly by NAEYC and Pre-K Now. The authors of the report are L.C. Halgunseth and A. Peterson of NAEYC and D.R. Stark and S. Moodie of Pre-K Now. For the full report, see www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/ecprofessional/EDF_Literature%20Review.pdf.

Some programs focus on getting families to change rather than recognizing their strengths and abilities to support children's learning (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe 2006; Souto-Manning & Swick 2006).

Using ecological and social exchange theories as frameworks, this article will (a) define family engagement; (b) describe ways to strengthen relationships between programs and families; and (c) provide evidence-based practices that can strengthen family engagement and improve learning for all children.

Definition of family engagement

This article focuses on family *engagement* rather than family *involvement*. It takes a strength-based perspective by recognizing that all families are involved in their children's learning and well-being in some way. The issue, however, is whether families are engaged with their children's early childhood education programs and are collaborating with them in meaningful ways that maximize their children's educational experiences. The description of family engagement below stems from the work of Henderson and Berla (1994), Epstein (2001), and Weiss, Caspe, and Lopez (2006). It consists of six components and emphasizes concepts that are continuous, reciprocal, and strength-based (Halgunseth et al. 2009).

1. Early childhood education programs encourage family participation in decision making related to their children's education. Families act as advocates and take part in decision-making opportunities.
2. Consistent, two-way communication is facilitated through multiple forms and is responsive to the language spoken by the family.

Linda Halgunseth, PhD, is coordinator of the Office of Applied Research at NAEYC.

naeyc® 3, 7

Early Childhood Education Programs

3. Early childhood education programs and families collaborate and exchange knowledge.
4. Early childhood education programs and families place an emphasis on creating and sustaining learning activities at home and in the community that extend the teachings of the program so as to enhance each child's early learning.
5. Families create a home environment that values learning and supports programs. Programs and families collaborate in establishing children's goals.
6. Early childhood education programs create an ongoing and comprehensive system for promoting family engagement by ensuring that program leadership and teachers are dedicated and trained, and receive the supports they need to fully engage families.

Model of family engagement

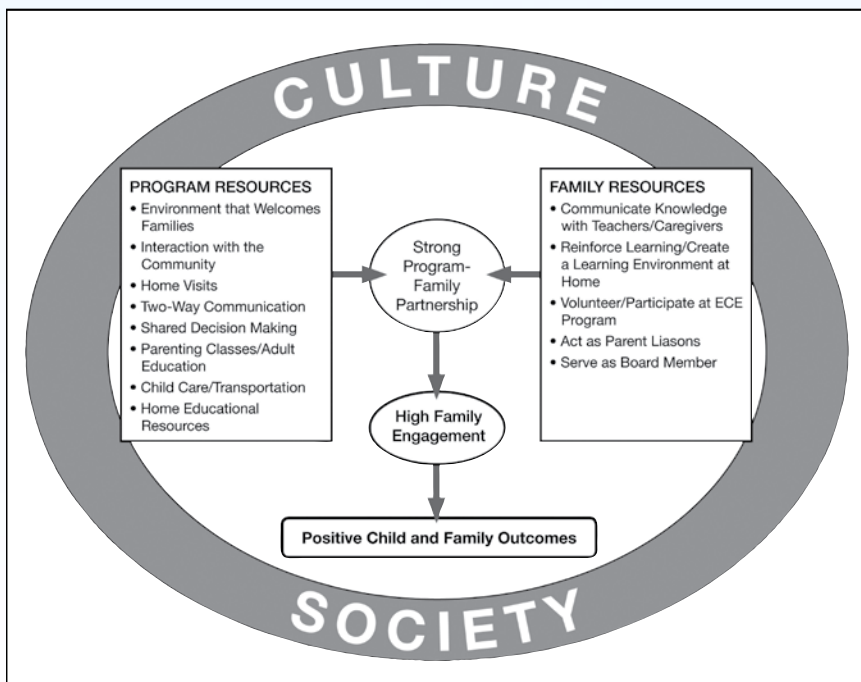
Ecological and social exchange theories help us to organize the literature on effective early childhood family-engagement practices. An ecological perspective explains that children's development and learning occurs within a series of embedded systems, ranging from proximal (for example, home) to distal (for example, society). Harmonious interactions between systems (for example, child care programs and families) promote family engage-

ment and children's development (Bronfenbrenner 2004; Xu & Filler 2008). The ecological theory, however, does not explain the motivation for families and schools to work together. Knowing what motivates families across all cultural and linguistic backgrounds to take part in their children's early education setting is crucial for early childhood educators who are seeking to raise their levels of engagement with the families they serve (Marschall 2006).

According to the social exchange theory, development of social relationships, such as those between child care programs and family members, depends on the exchange of resources between the groups and weighing the costs and benefits. For example, programs can offer resources or benefits that are tangible (adult education courses) or intangible (a warm and welcoming environment). In turn, families can offer educators knowledge about their children or help reinforce at home key concepts taught in the program.

The concept of trust is also at the core of social exchange theory. As mutual trust evolves between the family and the program, so will the extent of and commitment to the partnership. If either families or teachers lose their sense of trust, however, the commitment to the relationship will begin to diminish, as will feelings of engagement (Early 1992; Lopez, Kreider, & Caspe 2004; Nakonezny & Denton 2008).

The figure at left presents practices rooted in research that promote engagement and positive child outcomes in families across ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. When there is a strong program-family partnership in place, families are engaged, which ultimately benefits the children. Attention to cultural sensitivity, the child's age, and the readiness level of family members and program staff applies to each set of the resources listed. This model is also self-reinforcing. As child and family outcomes improve, the strength of the early childhood program-family partnership and the level of family engagement increase.



Recommendations for practice

Educators, administrators, and other program staff can use the following recommendations to enhance family engagement in their programs:

Integrate culture and community. Promote acceptance of all families by (a) inviting role models of different cultures to participate

in the classroom, (b) incorporating activities into the curriculum that teach about the cultural practices and traditions of all children in the classroom, and (c) translating essential materials into families' home languages. Encourage program staff to interact with children and families outside of the school setting in the communities where children and families live.

Provide a welcoming environment. Make navigating the school easy by having staff greet families near the entrance of the school or classroom throughout the year. Ensure that signs in families' home languages are posted and clear. Be sure to create clear, continuous channels of two-way communication between staff and families by scheduling regular conference sessions, communicating with families at drop-off and pickup, and exchanging e-mail addresses and phone numbers.

Strive for program-family partnerships.

Include families in making decisions related to both their own child's education and the program as a whole. Facilitate children's learning at home (Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez 2006) by giving families information and resources about topics the children are investigating during the day.

Make a commitment to outreach. Conduct home visits, if families are comfortable with the idea, during which teachers can learn from families about children's home environments, interests, and preferred learning styles.

Provide family resources and referrals. Provide information about preventive health and family services. Offer child care, transportation, and refreshments to make it easier for families to participate in school activities and events.

Set and reinforce program standards. Set clear program standards that are comprehensive and emphasize ongoing outreach. Provide professional development opportunities on culturally sensitive, evidence-based family engagement practices.

© Ellen B. Senisi



References

- Bronfenbrenner, U. 2004. *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Crawford, P.A., & V. Zygoris-Coe. 2006. All in the family: Connecting home and school with family literacy. *Early Childhood Education Journal* 33 (4): 261–67.
- Early, B.P. 1992. An ecological–exchange model of social work consultation within the work group of the school. *Social Work in Education* 14 (4): 207–14.
- Epstein, J. 2001. *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Halgunseth, L., A. Peterson, D.R. Stark, & S. Moodie. 2009. Family engagement, diverse families, and early childhood education programs: An integrated review of the literature. Washington, DC: NAEYC and Pre-K Now. www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/ecprofessional/EDF_Literature%20Review.pdf
- Henderson, A.T., & N. Berla. 1994. *A new generation of evidence: The family is critical to student achievement*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Education.
- Henrich, C., & D. Gadaire. 2008. Head Start and parental involvement. *Infants and Young Children* 21 (1): 56–69.
- Iruka, I.U., & P.R. Carver. 2006. *Initial Results from the 2005 NHES Early Childhood Program Participation Survey (NCES 2006-075)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/earlychild/tables/table_1.asp?referrer=report.
- Lopez, M.E., H. Kreider, & M. Caspe. 2004. Co-constructing family involvement. *Evaluation Exchange* X (4): 2–3.
- Marschall, M. 2006. Parent involvement and educational outcomes for Latino students. *Review of Policy Research* 23 (5): 1053–76.
- Nakonezny, P., & W. Denton. 2008. Marital relationships: A social exchange theory perspective. *American Journal of Family Therapy* 36 (5): 402–12.
- Souto-Manning, M., & K.J. Swick. 2006. Teachers' beliefs about parent and family involvement: Rethinking our family involvement paradigm. *Early Childhood Education Journal* 34 (2): 187–93.
- Weiss, H., M. Caspe, & M.E. Lopez. 2006. Family involvement in early childhood education. *Family Involvement Makes a Difference* 1 (Spring). www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/family-involvement-in-early-childhood-education
- Xu, Y., & J. Filler. 2008. Facilitating family involvement and support for inclusive education. *The School Community Journal* 18 (2): 53–71.

Copyright © 2009 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. See Permissions and Reprints online at www.naeyc.org/yc/permissions.